DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 345 503 FL 019 657

AUTHOR McGroarty, Mary
TITLE Input, Interactions, and the Limits of Inference in Classroom Research: Comments on "Can Foreigners Do Foreigner Talk?"
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 6p.; For the journal as a whole, see FL 019 498.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT Texas Papers in Foreign Language Education; v1 n4 p289-293 Fall 1990

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Communication; *Classroom Research; English (Second Language); Inferences; Language Proficiency; Language Teachers; *Research Methodology; *Research Problems
IDENTIFIERS *Foreigner Talk; *Simplification (Language)

ABSTRACT

A study in which the ability of Peruvian teachers of English as a Second Language to simplify their own use of English appropriately for classroom use was examined, is discussed. It is noted that the study provides new data and has implications for future research on classroom language. It supports prior work on teacher talk and implies that non-native-speaking teachers can provide simplified input in the language classroom. However, it is also suggested that such descriptive research needs to be linked to experimental assessments of the input features thought to promote acquisition. By measuring the effects of different kinds of language modifications (e.g., lexical variety, propositional density) on learner mastery and the interactions between learner level and varieties of modification, a more differentiated model of the best linguistic environment for language learning can be constructed. Some of the data concerning the levels of syntactic complexity of the teachers' language are examined in greater detail. Extension and replication of the study are recommended. A brief bibliography is included. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Mitchell
Elizabeth
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED345503

Input, Interactions, and the Limits of Inference in Classroom Research: Comments on "Can Foreigners Do Foreigner Talk?"

MARY McGROARTY

Robert Milk's study "Can Foreigners Do Foreigner Talk?" extends the input paradigm to a group of speakers, non-native speaker teachers, and a setting, the EFL classroom, too rarely considered in research on language teaching. In so doing, it provides several important findings regarding the linguistic skills of these teachers and also indicates the direction for research needed to confirm the accuracy of the input hypothesis as an explanation of second language learning. The paper is useful in itself because of the new data it provides and additionally useful in its implications for future research on classroom language.

By looking at non-native teachers whose language is the main source of input for their students, the paper supports prior studies of teacher talk which have shown that teachers simplify their speech in various ways when talking to learners. Milk's work shows that teachers used significantly shorter utterances in classes than those used in collegial interviews and that the classroom utterances also tended to be less complex than those used in interviews, although the latter difference was not significant. For these variables, Milk's findings reflect many of the features of teacher talk summarized by Hatch (1983, pp.66 ff.) and suggest that the non-native teachers whose speech was examined are capable of making many of the same kinds of modifications in speech produced by native speakers. (As Milk observes, to establish that learner proficiency level was the factor precipitating modification, it would have been necessary to analyze the same instructor who taught two different levels, but the teaching assignments at the research site precluded such a design.). Nevertheless, by demonstrating that non-native teachers can modify their speech in presumably appropriate directions, Milk's work implies that non-native teachers can produce the simplified input that would serve to enhance learner opportunities to process the second language. Because the foreign language classroom in which both teacher and students are non-native speakers is a common instructional setting around the world, it is reassuring to know that it can potentially provide a positive environment for language acquisition as well as language learning.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

FL019657

However, to be reasonably certain that such teacher modifications do indeed improve learner access to the language taught, we need to link descriptive research such as Milk's study with experimental assessments of the features of input thought to promote acquisition. One way to do this would be to vary the features of input language systematically and test the effects of various types of modifications on learner comprehensions and production. Relevant here is research like that of Chaudron (1983) who studied different types of topic restatements used in lectures and measured consequent learner comprehension. In that study, more and less proficient university-level ESL students performed similarly on recall measures which tapped understanding of synonyms, but the less proficient learners had relatively more difficulty with grammatically complex input (p.448); in other words, for some features of input there was an interaction between learner proficiency level and comprehension. Such research underscores the need to examine a variety of input features and their relationships with learner skills at different levels in order to determine optimal linguistic environments for second language learners. This means looking at length and complexity of teacher utterances, as Milk has done, and in addition, identifying other features of teacher input such as lexical variety and propositional density and assessing the combinations of features best understood by learners at different levels and in various circumstances. By measuring the effects of different sorts of modifications on learner mastery of the language and the interactions between learner level and varieties of modification, we can build a more differentiated model of the linguistic environment best suited to a variety of learners. This model would, in turn, provide guidance for curriculum development and teacher training.

Milk's study as it stands offers powerful support for those interested in insuring that teachers possess a high degree of proficiency in the language they teach. The teachers who participated in his research all demonstrated a "solid basic proficiency" in English, as Milk remarks; most scored in the 4 range and all were rated as at least 3 on the Language Proficiency Interview, an oral rating system based on the Foreign Service Interview (or FSI, now often called Interagency Language Roundtable, or ILR) which includes six levels from 0 to 5 with plus points used to denote scores that approach but do not meet the standards for the subsequent level. The level of skill in the second language shown by these teachers is considerable and well beyond

that demonstrated by the college foreign language majors Carroll studied in the 1960s (Carroll, 1967). Milk's data corroborate some of the current work in language proficiency guidelines which set out Level 3 as the "minimal professional standard" (Liskin-Gasparro, 1984, p.25) needed for many positions involving use of the language. Milk's data suggest that Level 3 is the minimal level needed for teaching a second language; furthermore, there is an indication that attaining Level 4, a level characterized by, among other things, the ability to "tailor speech to the audience" (Lowe, 1980, p.96) might be directly useful for teachers. As Table 1 below shows, two of the three teachers who scored at Level 3 or 3+ did not show significant differences in utterance length between the classroom and the interview samples, while nine of the eleven who scored at Level 4 or 4+ did so. While the difference between these two groups of teachers is not statistically significant (according to Fisher's Exact Test, a test of significance developed to calculate exact probabilities for 2 x 2 tables with very small expected frequencies per cell), the data clearly challenge those interested in language assessment to operationalize definitions of tailoring speech to audience and test the linguistic strategies identified in terms of their contribution to effective second language teaching.

Table 1: Significant Differences in T-Unit Length Between Classroom and Interview Data

LPI Levels	Yes	No	Total
3, 3+	1	2	3
4, 4+	9	2	11
Total	10	4	14

The data imply that, if features of simplified input can be linked experimentally to improved learner outcomes, it might be helpful to use such information in teacher training. Both researchers in language proficiency assessment and teacher trainers could use this information to help determine what kind of language proficiency is needed to offer instruction in a second language.

The issue of the nature of language proficiency needed to teach a second language also points to the need for greater knowledge of the verbal interaction which takes place in the classroom. As Milk observes, previous work on classroom interaction by Long and

others suggests that it is not only the linguistic structure of input that affects efficiency of instruction; the function of utterances used must also be examined. The model of classroom interaction which we seek must be sensitive to the functions as well as the structures realized in the second language. In this connection, Milk's work points in an important direction hitherto explored only for dyads: the nature of the interaction that occurs when both parties are non-native speakers of the language involved. At present there is some indication that conversation between non-native speakers offers greater and more frequent scope for negotiation of meaning than does conversation between a native and non-native speaker (Gass & Varonis, 1985; Varonis & Gass, 1985). A logical next step is, then, to look at the classroom discourse that takes place between teacher and students when both are non-native speakers. Some of the findings from a series of experimental communication tasks given to pairs of students (Gass & Varonis, 1985, pp.158-160) indicate that, when non-native speakers interact, interlocutors in unidirectional tasks and recipients (rather than givers) of new information use frequent indications of ambiguous input. These findings need to be replicated in the foreign language classroom where the roles of teacher and student and the tasks involved in second language instruction affect the possibilities for communication. In theoretical and practical terms, it would be useful to see whether the negotiation of meaning that goes on when both teacher and students are non-native speakers is different in frequency and kind from that which obtains when the teacher is a native speaker and the students are not.

Studies which elucidate the interactional dimension of input in addition to its linguistic structure in classrooms where all involved are non-native speakers can thus show how different kinds of communications opportunities are shaped. When combined with assessment of the effectiveness of different kinds of opportunities on learner outcomes, such studies can provide valuable information for those who wish to see how the language of the classroom make learning possible. Building on Milk's fine initial efforts, studies of teacher input, relationships between input features, and interactions between non-native teachers and learners can bring us closer to defining that elusive optimum i + 1 in the second language classroom. Milk's research suggests some of the ways to move from inference to evidence in studies of classroom language.

References

Carroll, J. (1967). Foreign language proficiency levels attained by language majors near graduation from college. *Foreign Language Annals*, 1(1), 131-151.

Chaudron, C. (1983). Simplification of input: Topic reinstatements and their effects on L2 learners' recognition and recall. *TESOL Quarterly*, 17(3), 437-458.

Gass, S. & Varonis, E. (1985). Task variation and non-native/non-native negotiation of meaning. In S. Gass & C. Madden (Eds.), *Input in second language acquisition*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.

Hatch, E. (1983). Simplified input and second language acquisition. In R. Andersen (Ed.), *Pidginization and creolization as language acquisition*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House..

Liskin-Gasparro, J. (n.d.) The ACTFL proficiency guidelines: A historical perspective. In T. Higgs (Ed.), *Teaching for proficiency, the organizing principle*. Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Company.

Lowe, P. (1980). *Manual for LS oral interview workshops*. Washington: CIA Language School.

Milk, R. (1985). Can foreigners do foreigner talk? Paper presented at the Colloquium on Classroom-Centered Research, 19th Annual TESOL Convention, New York City, April.

Varonis, E. & Gass, S. (1985). Non-native/non-native conversations: A model for negotiation of meaning. *Applied Linguistics*, 6(1), 71-90.